Solomon's *Preference of* Death to Life, *explained and vindicated.*

A

SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

English Chapel at GOTHENBURG,

BY

GEORGE MARRIOTT,

Sometime Chaplain of the Factory there.

LONDON:

Printed for W. FLEXNEY, oppoſite GRAY'S INN-GATE, HOLBORN.

M.D.CC.LXVIII. [Pr. 6d.]

MUSEUM BRITANNICUM

SERMON,

BY

GEORGE MARRIOTT,

Solomon's *Preference of* Death *to* Life, *explained and vindicated.*

A SERMON.

ECCLESIASTES iv. 2.

Wherefore I praiſed the dead which are already dead, more than the living which are yet alive.

IT is deſireable, both for the comfort of our minds, and for encouragement to the diſcharge of our duty, to have a juſt conception of the value of our preſent exiſtence. Yet unhappily there is no ſubject, about which various men differ more

widely in their opinions, equally diſtant from the truth and reaſon of the caſe.—Some perſons, of a light and lively diſpoſition, and in agreeable circumſtances of life, are ſo highly ſatisfied with the gaieties and conveniencies of an ample fortune, that they are willing to make this world their final place of abode, and think it irkſome to be admoniſhed that they muſt ever relinquiſh ſo comfortable a ſituation. In ſhort, they know of nothing that diminiſhes the value of this life, but the dread of its coming to a period. There are others, of a dark and melancholy caſt, who are perpetually finding fault with every article of their condition, and who look upon the preſent ſtate of the whole human race, as wretched and deplorable without exception; complaining of life as a wearieſome burden, and wiſhing in the height of their impatience, that *as an untimely birth they had never been*, nor breathed in ſuch circumſtances the vital air.

Such

Such are the extremes of perſons governed by their paſſions, and unaccuſtomed to view the condition of human life, with the aid of reaſon and religion.

The preciſe meaning of Solomon in the words of the text, will be conſidered preſently. In the mean time we may obſerve upon certain views, in which it would be unjuſtifiable to adopt the ſentiment they contain. Our firſt undertaking will diſcover wherein the true value conſiſts of the preſent ſtate of our being; and the other will point out the cauſe from whence human life ceaſes to be deſireable.

If, contrary to the intention of Solomon, we ſhould interpret the ſtate of the dead to be a ſtate of annihilation, it would ſtill admit of queſtion, whether a life of pain would not always be preferred by a rational being, to the loſs of all conſciouſneſs and perception. Milton accordingly puts this argument into the mouth of one of the demons.

——— for who would loſe,
Tho' full of pain, this intellectual being,
Thoſe thoughts that wander thro' eternity,
To periſh rather, ſwallowed up and loſt
In the wide womb of uncreated night,
Devoid of ſenſe and motion? ———

From a view therefore of the common miſeries which prevail in the world, to pronounce annihilation preferable to the preſent ſtate of human life, would be raſh and extravagant in a high decree. But by the ſtate of the dead, it is unlikely Solomon ſhould mean a ſtate of annihilation, if it was only for that one deſcription of his, in the laſt chapter of this book, of the diſſolution of ſoul and body. *Then ſhall the duſt return to the earth as it was, and the ſpirit ſhall return to God who gave it.* And his declaration in the concluſion, *that God ſhall bring every work into judgment*, ſeems ill to conſiſt with ſuppoſing the ſtate of the dead to be a ſtate of oblivious inſenſibility. But to put it beyond a doubt, that Solomon was ſo far inconſiſtent with himſelf

himſelf as to intend it ſo in the words of this text, we need only rehearſe the verſe which next follows. *Yea, better is he than both they* (better than either the living or the dead) *which hath not yet been, who hath not ſeen the evil work that is done under the ſun.* But if the ſtate of the dead be a ſtate of annihilation, it would be difficult to ſhew in what reſpect the condition of him who *hath not yet been*, is preferable to that of the *dead*; both in that caſe being preciſely on an equal footing. The ſtate of the dead therefore, preferred in the text to that of the living, was not, in the idea of Solomon, a ſtate of annihilation.

It will appear, moreover, in due time, that Solomon does not prefer death to life from any motive of diſcontent with the ſtate of human life in general, but from an abhorrence of one particular ſpecies only of human miſery. And we may venture to affirm, that the ſentiment of the text is juſtifiable only in that particular caſe. When we take a view of the common calamities

and

and natural evils of the preſent ſtate, we ought not to complain againſt providence, nor haſtily wiſh that the day of death may preſently relieve us. All the diſpenſations of God's providence are wiſe, juſt, and merciful; and as long as we are in his hands, and ſubmit in well-doing to whatever he inflicts, it cannot go ill with us upon the whole. Our preſent ſufferings, tho' ſeemingly, the marks of ſeverity, will have an iſſue in God's good ſeaſon, to our abundant advantage. And it will appear, in the concluſion of things, that God, for wiſe and good reaſons, has ſuffered human life to be chequered with evils, to contraſt againſt the pleaſures, in which, it muſt be allowed, his indulgent providence permits great numbers to rejoice a conſiderable part of their lives. For, embittered as the ſweets of life undoubtedly are by a mixture of evil, there is yet a ſufficient portion of enjoyment on the face of the earth, to plead for the ſuperintendence of a juſt and gracious director. And at the ſame time

there

there is a ſufficient quantity of wickedneſs on the part of our ſpecies, to prove that we are not entitled at preſent to a ſtate of uninterrupted repoſe; even ſuppoſing, which is more than can be proved, that we are capable of enjoying it.

The ſentiment of this text, moreover, is not intended to countenance a ſceptical inclination, to repreſent the miſeries of human life, as derogatory from the perfections of the governor of the world. The unavoidable ſufferings and natural evils which at any time render life uneaſy, are nothing comparable, either in number or degree, to the diſtreſſes and inconveniencies which ariſe from the imperfection of artificial ſociety, and from the voluntary actions and indiſcretions of men themſelves. That theſe, together with natural unavoidable evils, ſhould be laid to the charge of the ſupreme being, muſt appear highly unjuſtifiable to a conſiderate perſon. And yet, at the ſame time, that he ſhould inflict the one, and ſuffer the other to fall upon

our

our ſpecies, may be ſtrictly juſt, for any reaſon we are able to aſſign: And we have the higheſt reaſon to believe, that the whole chain of events is ſubſervient to a gracious plan, of which we are intended to reap the benefits. And if, as we are taught by the invaluable doctrine of our Saviour, *not even a ſparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly Father*, we ought chearfully to acquieſce in all the meaſures of his government, and not grow weary of life by reaſon of *light afflictions which are but for a moment*. The ſhortneſs of life in this view, is a great bleſſing: But inaſmuch as we are aſſured, that the events of it are directed by a gracious ſuperintendant, we ought not to blaſpheme the ways of providence, nor wiſh ourſelves among the dead ſooner than the ſeaſon appointed for our removal, but ſay in the language of reſignation, *It is the Lord, let him do what ſeemeth him good. I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulneſs haſt afflicted me.*

But

But it may ſtill be ſuſpected, notwithſtanding the injuſtice of diſcontent, and the indefenſibility of arraigning the divine diſpenſations, that Solomon however *does* mean to expreſs his diſſatisfaction with the miſeries of human life, and to find fault with the ways of providence. And has he not ſaid, in another part of this book, that *the day of death is better than the day of one's birth?*——If we read the whole verſe where thoſe words are found, we ſhall eaſily perceive that his meaning there affects not the preſent ſubject. It runs thus. *A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth.* Here are two affirmations linked together in the ſame ſentence; which obliges us to ſuppoſe that there is a connection in the ſenſe, which appears to be this. *A good name is better than precious ointment*, and it is more eligible to conclude a life ſpent with glory and reputation, than to begin a life which may turn out an ignominious one. Or poſſibly he might

 mean,

mean, that *the day of death*, to a man who deſerves well of his fellow-creatures, *is better than the day of his birth*, from a principle founded on an obſervation, that the full and ample honours of a meritorious character are generally deferred 'till the day of a man's death.

The ſuns of glory pleaſe not 'till they ſet. This paſſage therefore, containing nothing of complaint on the miſery of life, has no connection with the argument before us. To which we return.

The proper value of our preſent exiſtence does not ariſe from the degree of exemption we may enjoy from troubles and calamities. Nor is its value diminiſhed by an overbalance of adverſity. This life, being a ſtate of diſcipline and preparation for a better, riſes frequently in its value from the very circumſtance of adverſity; inaſmuch as adverſity is generally more favourable than proſperity to thoſe moral

improvements of the ſoul, which are the terms of its advancement in a future ſtate of recompenſe. But the whole of this life, and every circumſtance and event of it, whether adverſe or proſperous, derives its value from the opportunity it affords of moral exerciſe and improvements. It is in the power of God alone to know preciſely what is beſt for us on the whole; to aſcertain what portion of good or evil things will be moſt conducive to our final felicity; and at what ſeaſons, and in what viciſſitudes, to adminiſter both with the greateſt efficacy. And the benignity of his nature prompts him invariably to the choice of thoſe meaſures which are beſt. This being the nature of the preſent ſtate, and ſuch being the character of him who directs the events of it, the afflictive ſtrokes of his providence ſtand in the ſame view with the bleſſings of his proſpering hand. Both are equally grounds of praiſe and thankſgiving; and life, ſo long as it is the will of God it ſhould continue, whether it be

painful, or abounds with pleaſure, inaſmuch as it furniſhes the means of our promotion in moral excellence, and cheriſhes the diſpoſitions, and favors the acquirements, which qualify for future glory, is more deſireable than an untimely removal to the ſtate of the dead.

What, then, you will ſay, is the meaning of Solomon? and on what account does he pronounce the dead happier than the living? or how, in ſo pronouncing, does he ſtand clear of diſcontent or of blaſphemy?——We ſhall in a moment perceive his meaning (and a noble ſentiment it is) if we look back only to the foregoing verſe, where his words are theſe. *I returned and conſidered all the oppreſſions that are done under the ſun. And behold, the tears of ſuch as were oppreſſed, and they had no comforter. And on the ſide of their oppreſſors there was power, but they had no comforter. Wherefore,* or an account of ſuch oppreſſions, *I praiſed the dead which are already dead,* or

I pronounced them to be happy, *more than the living which are yet alive.* Solomon's concluſion therefore, is limited entirely to circumſtances of oppreſſion, or ſlavery: and it is not in any other view that he prefers the ſtate of the dead to that of the living. Other evils of life proceed from the providential hand of God, or ariſe out of the nature and conſtitution of things. On this account they are to be ſubmitted to; nor is it deſireable to be removed from them to the ſtate of the dead, one moment before it is determined by the will of God. The ſtate of life, under theſe afflictions, ſo long as it is the will of God it ſhould laſt, is better for us than the ſtate of the dead: not better for the preſent moment, inaſmuch as the ſtate of the dead who die in God's favour is better than even the beſt condition upon earth: but better upon the whole, and as it will appear in the iſſue of things. But the caſe of oppreſſion is far different from natural or providential evils. It is an evil, inflicted by the

hand

hand of Man, and not by the hand of God; to which we are under no obligation to ſubmit; which on the contrary we ought to reſiſt to the utmoſt of our power; which deprives us of thoſe natural rights, which it is our duty to aſſert for ourſelves and our fellow-creatures,—thoſe natural rights, which ought not to be abridged, inaſmuch as the performance of our duty to God requires the enjoyment of them in their vigour and extent. In proportion as we are cramped in the exertion of our powers, our hands are tied from the atchievements of virtue, and the offices of duty. Nothing can be more evident than the diminution which is made of the value of human life, by circumſtances of oppreſſion, according to the well-known and juſtly extolled ſentiment of the Grecian Poet, that

——— whatever day
Makes man a ſlave, takes half his worth away.

Slavery is the fierceſt adverſary of virtue,

virtue, and the moſt malignant defeater of all the gracious purpoſes of God, in creation, providence, and redemption. It is abſolutely incompatible with the ſervice which a chriſtian owes to his God and his Saviour. The Lord's free-man is obliged to conduct himſelf according to his conſcience, by the rule of the goſpel; and muſt not bend, at the peril of his ſoul, to the unrighteous decrees of uſurpation. Every oppreſſive dominion upon earth, is an oppoſition to the reign and government of God. It is the will of God, that his ſubjects ſhould be free to obey his reaſonable and equitable laws, which he has written in the human heart, and in the volume of revelation. And oppreſſors of the earth ſhould know, that the mighty and irreſiſtible plan of providence is againſt them and their dominion, and will not only be glorified in the demolition of their iniquitous grandeur, but operate to the vindication of every individual that has ſuffered in all the periods of its duration. Man, in a ſtate of

ſlavery,

ſlavery, is neceſſarily deprived of that ſenſe of perſonal worth, that reverential awe of his own dignity and importance, which is the fundamental principle of virture in all its branches. Slavery converts the choiceſt gifts of God, and the nobleſt powers and prerogatives of human nature, into the deepeſt of misfortunes. Reaſon itſelf, imparted to us for the guide of our actions, and the baſis of our advancement from one degree of moral happineſs to another, becomes the greateſt of curſes, if we are not at liberty to follow its direction. Happier far is any animal when abridged of its liberty, that moves by the blind impulſe of original inſtinct, and ſo much happier as it is more remote in its diſtance from the intellectual ſyſtem. And how miſerably are the purpoſes defeated by ſlavery, which the Creator propoſed from the human Paſſions! that rich magazine of inſtruments and forces, to which virtue was to be indebted for many a brave reſiſtance, and many a glorious conqueſt, of the infernal powers of temptation. To

what

what end, under the haughty nod of oppreſſion, ſhould any man be a father? Or why ſhould the amorous virgin forget her native home, and throw herſelf in the arms of a fond protector? Shall it be to propagate a generation of ſlaves? What proſpect ſo bitter and diſtreſsful! Slavery admits not of thoſe viciſſitudes of fortune, from whence human happineſs derives its reliſh in this imperfect ſtate; ſuffers not life to be chequered with a diverſity of events; knows no day of proſperity, contraſted againſt a day of adverſity; but involves the whole period of life in one black night of ſubſtantial miſery. In ſlavery, where is the vigour, the gaiety, and the uncontrouled wildneſs of amiable youth? The blood ſhould flow quick in the veins, and pleaſure ſhould redden in the cheek. But alas! it fades, droops, and ſickens, like a flower half-ſtripped by the ſeverity of tempeſt. Whilſt old age ſhrugs under a ſenſe of its injuries, like an oak blaſted in the trunk.

In all other caſes of affliction, it is our duty to ſubmit, and endeavour the prolongation of life. But in caſe of ſlavery, life loſes its value; and it becomes our duty to hazard it in defence of liberty: not to throw it away in a fit of unmanly deſperation, not puſillanimouſly to deſtroy it ourſelves becauſe we are weary of it, but nobly to hazard it when the cauſe of Freedom calls for our aſſiſtance. For when it is out of our power to reſiſt the force of oppreſſion, the caſe is altered; it may then be deemed a chaſtiſement of the almighty, and accordingly requires our patient endurance, waiting however, and imploring the compaſſion of the deity, that a period may ariſe, when the blood of the hero ſhall not be ſpilled in vain. To be contented in ſlavery is the meaneſt of vices: but to contemn life, and to welcome death in the defence of liberty, is the part of excellent and heroic virtue. To which the ſentiment of the text, that the ſtate of the dead is to be preferred to the life of the

ſlave,

ſlave, is an uſeful ſtimulating principle. It is a principle full of honour, generoſity, and benevolence: and he that acts under the influence of it, is infinitely more valuable than the cringing dependants of tyranny and uſurpation, who enjoy an ignoble repoſe and ſplendour, founded on the miſery of a great part of their ſpecies. And while theſe infamous characters are ſacrificing to intereſt every public conſideration, and preparing chains for all poſterity to come, the friend of liberty, having put all to the hazard in the juſt vindication of it, beholds with ſatisfaction the vital blood flowing from his veins, as the price of freedom in future generations; and, being fitted to ſhine in a ſuperior orb, burſts from the priſon of mortality itſelf.

Should any one be deſirous to have Solomon's preference accounted for, of the ſtate of him who *hath not yet been*, to that both of the living and the dead, let me add, that it demands our particular notice,

that he does not ſay, better is he that ſhall *never be born*, but, better is he which hath *not yet been*. And his meaning undoubtedly is this: becauſe he may be born in better times, and have an eaſier and pleaſanter paſſage thro' life; when an æra of liberty ſhall have ſucceeded the times of oppreſſion; when human life may appear in its higheſt degree of eſtimation, and the ſons of men as yet unborn, whoſe nativity is ſuſpended till tyranny ſhall have its fall, may not only enjoy a more agreeable paſſage down the valley of time, but poſſeſs ſuperior advantages as candidates for eternity.

To conclude. The paſſage of my text, which has been generally miſunderſtood, and interpreted in a ſenſe diſgraceful to its royal author, appears, from what has been ſaid, to be truly worthy of him; and to contain a noble ſentiment in favour of Liberty, which does immortal honour to one of the greateſt and wiſeſt of Kings. The moſt

contemptible

contemptible character upon the face of the earth is formed, when Tyranny, the moſt ignoble of paſſions, takes poſſeſſion of a royal or imperial breaſt. And Majeſty, on the other hand, receives the higheſt acceſſion to its greatneſs, when it delights to convert its power into a guardian of the liberties of mankind. By this godlike quality, the Kings of Britain that adorn the ſhort line of Brunſwick (may it never have a period!) have demonſtrated their hearts to have been greater than their Thrones. And all great and wiſe Kings, and all great and wiſe men, whatſoever be their ſtations, will infallibly tread in the ſteps of Solomon, and be friends to Liberty.

THE END.

By the same AUTHOR,

The BIRTH of the JESUIT. A Poem. In Three Books. Price 2 s. 6 d.

The PRIMATE. An Ode. Written in *Sweden*. Price 1 s.

Printed for the AUTHOR, and Sold by WILLIAM FLEXNEY, oppoſite Gray's Inn Gate, Holborn.